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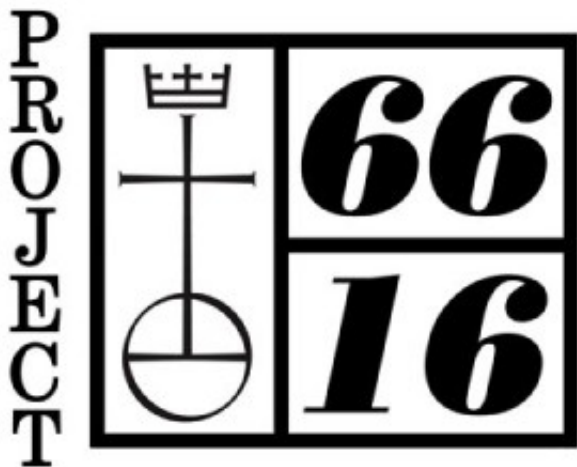
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Project 66-16 Special, Part Two: Why “Project 66-16”?

NOTE: Mike Stroud, director of the Project 66-16 history initiative of the Conference, was unable to present a workshop scheduled during the 2014 Annual Meeting due to a circumstance beyond his and the Conference’s control. In lieu of that, he will give his presentation on the website, in two installments. Here is the second and final part. [Click this link to read part one.](#)



In a form of the Christian faith that presently is highly sensitive to cultural trends and so-called “relevance,” it will seem odd to some that the preservation of denominational history would be worth bothering with. In times like these, the argument goes, when local congregations are mainly concerned to remain viable in the face of virulent competition from authoritarian forms of Christianity on the right and secularist antipathy on the left, even passing concern about the past is a luxury that cannot be afforded in desperate times like now. If a church’s, or denomination’s, past is not serviceable, as it were, to its imperatives for

institutional growth or else the avoidance of decay, then no one should be concerned about it, other than for sentimental purposes (often a polite way of saying “well, it’s something to keep the old folks entertained and out of the way of everybody else who actually does things”). In this condition, the value

of history is scarcely self-evident to a large number of our contemporaries.

Of course, not all Christian bodies take that attitude, by a long shot. Communion in this country that are based upon European traditions and are predicated on hierarchical patterns of authority instinctively venerate their pasts, if not outright worship them at times. They espouse the view that their development was “organic,” as opposed to the “artificial” or “willed” histories of what [Vanderbilt University](#) historian Paul Conkin termed “[American Originals](#).” But they are a numerical and cultural minority in the United States, far surpassed in sheer presence and influence by revivalist and restorationist groups who hold that, not only should the bathwater, or what [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#) called the cultural clothing of the Christian faith, be thrown out, but the baby also. Such an argument might seem incongruous with the claims of most of them to be upholding supposedly traditional ways of life, but much of the value systems they refer to have usually reflect local prejudices and customs that are at best tangentially related to a Biblical and theological understanding of existence. The presumption of modernity’s superiority often wears a reactionary disguise.

Then, is it safe to say as a corollary that we, in the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ, who are reputed to sit lightly to traditional forms (even though some local customs are embraced wholeheartedly in certain places), should, by those lights, embrace our heritage as an antidote to the seductive lure of traditional-ism, created by a hunger for roots not available in existing churchly institutions? Mike Stroud, director of the Conference’s “[Project 66-16](#)” initiative, thinks that it is—if understood properly and used in sensible proportions as a leaven in the ministry of proclamation and service in the Gospel. To that end, he has been working since circa 2008, volunteering his time, work, and money (having predominantly the first two and not enough of the third, admittedly) to find out these things, outlined as below:

The general and specific lines of development, mission strategies, successes and failures of the Southeast Conference and the predecessor bodies (the Southeast Convention and the Convention of the South of the Congregational Christian Churches, and the Alabama-Tennessee Region of the South Indiana Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church—along with smaller entities therein). They encompass these activities, among others:

- 1)** Church development, especially in the field of new church starts;
- 2)** Coordination of mission priorities among congregations, and how such priorities reflect/reflected those of national UCC/Congregational Christian/E&R entities and needs in their local communities, noting conflicts between the two and the proportions of each at different periods in time;
- 3)** Work in assisting congregations in developing Christian Education, stewardship, and social ministry programs, a delicate endeavor made more perilous by the culturally marginal status of most of them;

- 4) Work in developing a program for youth ministry on the association and conference levels, and the difficulties posed by constantly changing customs among high-schoolers on the one hand, and the geographical, racial, and theological distances in the Conference on the other;
- 5) Adjudication, if any, of tensions and conflicts resulting from the UCC's historic espousal of "liberal" social aims, usually between local churches composed of affluent, educated, metropolitan residents and those made up of working-class or agricultural-heritage people residing in the small towns and rural areas (especially Alabama and Georgia) who, regardless of political affinities, cherished local traditions and older theologies above national priorities, often to the point of resistance and schism;
- 6) Encouragement of women's work and ministry, which expanded in later years beyond traditional mission auxiliaries to active service in the ordained and licensed ministry, and the issues surrounding deployment of female clergy;
- 7) Relations among the Conference and the associations, the national UCC "instrumentalities," and local churches, taking into account their legal autonomy one from another and the opportunities and drawbacks posed by this style of congregational church governance;
- 8) Relations between the Conference and judicatories of other mainline Protestant denominations in the region (namely the **Disciples of Christ**, the **Presbyterians**, the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**) and those between UCC congregations and churches of those judicatories, with consideration given to some of those churches' status as part of the cultural establishment of the South, and the UCC's relative lack of such reputation;
- 9) Relations between the Conference and associations and those institutions of theological learning in the Conference's territory that provide ordained ministerial leadership for the UCC, namely the **Vanderbilt University Divinity School**, the **Candler School of Theology of Emory University**, the **Columbia Theological Seminary**, the **Interdenominational Theological Center**, and the **Beeson Divinity School of Samford University**;
- 10) Relations between the Conference and associations, and the Congregational Christian Churches beforehand, and those institutions of higher learning established by the American Missionary Association in the region for African-Americans and underprivileged Euro-Americans, such as **Fisk University**, **Talladega College**, **Tougaloo College**, and **Piedmont College**, and numerous secondary schools that operated from the 1860s until about the 1950s;
- 11) Participation in UCC interests in witness and advocacy on behalf of racial minorities, those professing alternative sexual orientations, better treatment of the environment, relief of poverty and social oppression, and general non-authoritarian forms of social improvement.

By researching primary source documents, interviewing selected figures who played prominent roles in shaping those aspects of the Conference's common life, and employing the histories of similar religious groups in the U.S. and the South specifically, Project 66-16 seeks to help these groups of people better understand the peculiar mission of the Conference and its constituent local churches:

- 1)** Clergy and lay people belonging to those congregations, with a particular focus upon individuals have recently joined them, and also congregations that have recently become a part of the UCC, or those considering membership therein;
- 2)** Leaders and staff members of the Conference and allied entities;
- 3)** Staff members of national UCC bodies in their efforts to coordinate work in the denomination at large with that here in the Southeast;
- 4)** Students of religious history in the Southeastern United States.

At present the author envisions, although has not taken definite steps toward, publication of a book that would be available at an affordable price for use by the audiences listed above. It is likely that a press run would entail a limited edition of copies, while electronic book form would be available to a larger public.

Project 66-16 is not so ambitious as to claim that, by itself, it can provide a viable vision that will hold good for the Conference once and for all. But a more modest aim of bringing our small portion of the Great Story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the attention of those who have worked and prayed for us over the years, are doing so now, and will do so in the future, is certainly feasible and a proper response of gratitude to our forebears and generosity to our descendants.

For more on Project 66-16, visit these two websites, featuring documents and photos from the early 20th century up to today:

Internet Archive

Flickr

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About Michael Stroud